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RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU PRIORITY 6437
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 4645
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 2516
RUEHNY/AMEMBASSY OSLO PRIORITY 4604
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 3710
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI PRIORITY 8875
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI PRIORITY 6254
RUEHON/AMCONSUL TORONTO PRIORITY 0824
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 3100
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 000047

SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/08/2019

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PHUM](#) [MOPS](#) [CE](#)

SUBJECT: UNP ACCUSES GOVERNMENT OF ORDERING ATTACKS ON MEDIA

REF: A. COLOMBO 18

[1](#)B. 08 COLOMBO 921

Classified By: DCM JAMES R. MOORE REASONS: 1.4(b,d).

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: In an intervention in Parliament on January 9, Opposition Leader Ranil Wickremesinghe directly accused the Defense Secretary and the Army Commander of involvement in activities of "a few intelligence sections" responsible for the attack on the MTV station, the assassination of newspaper editor Lasantha Wickrematunge, and similar past incidents. The UNP leader and his alliance partners provided further details in a meeting with foreign diplomats, including Ambassador, later on January 9. The President, in his address to the nation announcing the capture of Elephant Pass, retorted that "there is a conspiracy with certain international forces" on the part of "those who have been driven to fear due to the successes of our military forces... to level unfounded charges against the Army Commander." He vowed to reveal details of this plot later. Later that evening, the Presidential Secretariat website announced the detention of a UNP Municipal Counselor in connection with the attack on MTV on the basis of an anonymous tip. On January 10, The Daily News printed vague allegations by SLFP backbenchers that certain named senior UNP MPs were involved somehow in this sinister conspiracy. End summary.

[1](#)2. (SBU) United National Party (UNP) head Ranil Wickremesinghe used his prerogative as Leader of the Opposition to make an unscheduled statement in Parliament on January 9. Speaking in Sinhala in the context of the January 6 attack on the MTV station (ref A) and the murder of Sunday Leader editor Lasantha Wickrematunge, Wickremesinghe alleged that elements of the state intelligence apparatus were responsible for the attacks, adding that these units were effectively not under the control of the Cabinet. He was careful not to blame the armed forces as a whole, saying, "Armed forces members are shocked about these incidents. The armed forces say that due to the activities of a few intelligence sections, the reputation of the country is being ruined... This group is only responsible to the Army Commander and through him to the Defense Secretary." Wickremesinghe called for any motorcycle units operating in Colombo to be brought under the jurisdiction of the Deputy Inspector General of Police responsible for security in the

capital area or Army sector commanders in each district to ensure accountability. He predicted that the attacks would not stop, but that the Sri Lankan judiciary and members of the Parliament would be the next targets.

13. (SBU) The government's riposte was not long in coming. In his address to the nation on the Army's capture of Elephant Pass, President Mahinda Rajapaksa said "Today our people wholeheartedly greet the victory of our heroic troops. However,... there are efforts to belittle these victories, to turn the attention of the people to other directions. There is a conspiracy with certain international forces to achieve this sinister objective. You would have already realized that the aim of these conspirators is to level unfounded charges against the Army Commander(and by this to destroy the morale of our troops, destabilize the country, tarnish the image of the country internationally, and make room for various international forces to interfere to grab our gains away from us. We are aware that such conspiracies arise when a country moves ahead without giving in to external pressures." The President then went on to cite a list of human rights abuses since the December 25, 2005 assassination of Tamil MP Pararajasingham in church in Batticaloa which have remained unsolved. "Who is it who stands to gain from all this? Is it not the aim of those who plan these incidents the belittling of the victories our heroic troops? We have a duty to expose to the country the persons behind these conspiratorial operations... This is a conspiracy against the entire country by those who have been driven to fear due to the successes of our armed forces."

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14. (SBU) Late on January 9 the Presidential Secretariat website carried a news item reporting the arrest of a UNP Municipal Councilor from Kotte (the district in which Parliament is located) in connection with the attack on MTV and promising further details. On January 11, the government-owned Daily News reported that the arrest had taken place following receipt on a police emergency number of an anonymous tip. SLFP MP Mahinadanada Aluthgamage hinted darkly about involvement by senior UNP MP Ravi Karunanayake in the plot but gave no relevant details.

15. (C) Wickremesinghe, former Foreign Minister Mangala Samaraweera (the leader of a dissident faction of the ruling SLFP), and Mano Ganesan, human rights activist (and leader of a party that represents Colombo Tamils), subsequently met with a group of Ambassadors to urge action on media freedom. Ranil stated he had proof that a group in army intelligence that reports directly to Fonseka and through him to the Defense Secretary was responsible for Wickrematunga's assassination and for previous murders such as the November 2006 killing in Colombo of Member of Parliament Nadarajah Raviraj. He said the group is comprised of army personnel who have some blemish on their records that gives the GSL leverage over them, as well as Karuna cadres. He alleged their activities are funded under the intelligence budget. He asserted that no one outside the military has access to assault weapons or claymores such as those used in the Maharaja TV attacks, and said he had disclosed all this in Parliament.

16. (C) Wickremesinghe stated that he would send letters to foreign diplomats calling for international inquiry into the Lasantha killing since the police could not be impartial. Ambassador asked whether the GSL had agreed, since no foreign government would even consider such a proposal without an official government request. He said he did not have consent but would request it. (Note: the government promptly rejected the initiative, saying that its own police were capable of conducting such an investigation.) Ambassador noted that even in cases where the GSL has a clear political will to bring culprits to justice (for example, in the assassination of Foreign Minister Lakshman Kadirgamar), the police had proved incapable. He suggested the opposition

could usefully use its Parliamentary budget prerogatives to fund an increase in police investigative capabilities. Wickremesinghe responded that once there is an independent police commissioner appointed by the Constitutional Council under the 17th Amendment to the Sri Lankan Constitution the UNP would support such an idea.

17. (S) Samaweera added that a retired intelligence officer by the name of Zaki does all the reconnaissance for these hits. He further alleged that the actual killings are done by someone nicknamed "Nevisanpath" (phonetic) who is part of the Defense Secretary's security detail. Samaraweera suggested that the international community consider enacting travel restrictions on senior GSL officials but could not cite a legal basis for such an action.

18. (S) According to several Embassy sources, Wickrematunga had evidence of high-level corruption in military procurement deals such as Sri Lanka's purchase of MIG airplanes from Ukraine - some of which he had, in fact, previously published. More important, according to opposition figures and media sources, Wickrematunga had compelling evidence - which we have not seen - implicating Army Commander Sarath Fonseka and Defense Secretary Gothabaya Rajapaksa, the President's brother, in a number of serious human rights violations. These allegedly were carried out by special units of military intelligence under the direction of Chief of National Intelligence Kapila Hendawitharana. Wickrematunga had planned to publish some of this material in the January 11 edition of the Sunday Leader. Among this evidence was a letter from former Chief of Army Staff Janaka

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Perera, assassinated on late 2008 after running as the lead candidate for the UNP in the North Central Province elections. The UNP and opposition media now appear convinced that these shadowy groups linked to military intelligence - and not the LTTE - were responsible for Perera's killing. (Ref B) According to this theory, this was the real reason for Defense Secretary Rajapaksa filing a lawsuit against Wickrematunga and the Leader, in the course of which Rajapaksa obtained a prior restraint order prohibiting Wickrematunga from publishing stories about him. These sources tell us that Wickrematunga's widow Sonali Somarasinghe, herself a senior journalist with the Leader, was in possession of this information and might go ahead with publication. Consequently her life could also be in danger.

19. (C) Independent defense analyst and Sunday Times journalist Iqbal Athas pointed out that both the attack on Maharaja's TV station and the assassination of Sunday Leader editor Lasantha Wickrematunga were professionally organized. The TV station attackers spoke a particular brand of Sinhala laced with military jargon, he noted. The advance preparation, including systematic surveillance of Wickrematunga, was also indicative of involvement on the part of the security forces. Athas reported heavy surveillance of his own residence on the night of December 28, with men in civilian clothes attempting to climb or penetrate the wall surrounding his house. A neighbor called the police emergency number, after which the vans and their occupants departed. Athas said he received a series of threatening calls on December 31 warning him not to write stories critical of the government. Athas told us he was able to reach President Rajapaksa by phone. According to him, the President responded that he had already spoken to the people involved, so Athas should not worry. Athas said that his sources within the intelligence services told him that the December 28 nocturnal visit to his house was in fact an attempt to abduct him. Athas believes that senior officials were annoyed at him for reporting accurate estimates of LTTE killed and remaining LTTE strength in his column, which appeared on the morning of December 28, and were determined to discover who his sources within the military are. He was convinced the same irregular units were involved in his surveillance as in the attacks on the TV station and the

editor and is making arrangements to leave the country - something he has had to do on several previous occasions.

(C) COMMENT: The government's attempt to blame the opposition for the recent attacks on the media are unlikely to convince many observers in Colombo. We cannot yet assess whether the government's rural Sinhalese base will be persuaded, but the February 14 elections for the Northwest and Central Provincial Council will provide a test of this. However, the attempts at damage control are an indication of how much pressure the government is under as a result of these incidents. Sources within the President's SLFP tell us that they fear the attack on the popular TV station and public revulsion over the killing of Wickrematunge may prevent the government from reaping the electoral bonanza it has expected in the wake of its military successes. One theory circulating about the reason the institutions were attacked is that those responsible felt cheated at the relatively restrained reaction of most Sri Lankans to the series of announcements of military triumphs, and lashed out against those they believed had tarnished their image.

Blake